A Corner in Apples

Another Chapter of THE FARMERS' SIDE OF IT.

So far as I know—and while we don't specialize on bananas in Bascom's Bridge, I've raised pretty much everything that folks has to buy that kin be produced in this belt—there ain't much of anything that don't get just the same sort of spread that pork meat does on the way from the farm to the city tables.

Take apples, for example. Bananas may be the first fruit of the poor—or they may not if you don't strike 'em on a push-cart on a Sat'day afternoon; but the good old apple, red, yellow or green, comes near bein' the fruit of the middle class. Cancel apples from the American dietary, an' you'd bust up the whole show. An' the jugglin' that's done with apples, between the orchard an' the town pie is a sin to bring tears to the eyes. The trouble is, just as it is with every other article of food, that the consumption has grown to be stupendous an' the bigger it gits the more complicated the system an' the more chanst of squeezin' the feller that has to eat. Pretty near every State in the Union grows apples more or less, but for the sake of makin' it clear I'm stickin' to the apples of New York State, which when all is said an' done produces more than any of the rest. It'd take a set of books to tell the whole story. All I want is to show how the game is played.

For instance, in 1920, for some of Nature's mysterious reasons, there was a whale of an apple crop all over the East. The year before the big operators had got an awful stingin' in the English market, for we ship a powerful lot of apples to England. They was lookin' fer a chanst to git even, an' by havin' the orchards everywhere inspected in the buddin' season they see there was gonta be a huge crop.

They found out too that England didn't have no apples at all. The thing was fenced up on every angle. The coopers was consolidated an' stuck the price of barrels that used to be thirty-two cents before the war up to a dollar an' a half at the beginnin' of the season, an' everything was cash, which a farmer in the growin' season usually ain't got, an' if he had a million barrels of fruit hangin' on his trees he needn't to bother to go to the local bank to look fer a dollar.

Then the play began. Almost any season the roads in the country is dusty with automobiles carryin' apple buyers around, goin' from one orchard to another. In August almost any farmer that's got an orchard has two or three buyers' cars parked in front of his house an' holds a little auction of his own. That year never a buyer showed up. None, no, not any. You'd have thought one or two might have jumped the fence an' bought, when the stuff began to beg fer a buyer, but no—no. It was the greatest case of thought transference the world ever seen. On'y the word was circulated from somewhere that the price was gonta be $1.75 a barrel—which was just the price of the barrel alone.

Time went on. The early apples come along, an' there was nobody to buy 'em. The farmers let 'em rot, mostly—fine Gravensteins an' Alexanders and Duchess of Oldenburgh. They had to. Just enough was bought to keep the fruit stand man supplied but payin' a high price, an' the public eatin' one at the peril of its life.

The months went by. The English Government, which looks after its farmers a little, had put a maximum on the price of apples from this side, but before it went on they was bringin' as high as a hunderd shillin's in London. An' still the apple buyers didn't slow up, still the coopers stuck tight, an' the finest crop of winter apples the East had ever seen begun to fall in the autumn gales an' rot on the ground.

The Problem in City and Country.

In the meantime folks in New York city that wanted to eat an apple out of hand was payin' ten an' even fifteen cents apiece for Kings and Hubbardstons an' Greenin's—which meant from forty to sixty dollars a bar'l. Th' unclassified apples—the wormy an' scaly an' scabby specimens that's culled out by any good fruit man an' sent to the cider mill or the pig pen—was sellin' in the big markets here at two or three pounds for a quarter, which was about fourteen to twenty dollars a bar'l.

In the orchards all over the State the ground was littered with the finest fruit anybody ever seen. Folks in the city, fer the most part, was goin' without. Apples was higher on Manhattan Island 'n pomegranates, an' a few miles up the river an' all the way to Buffalo the best crop in half a century was goin' to rot. That didn't make no difference. The ring was out to make money. That's what God made apples an' consumers fer.

By an' by, when the farmers had said goodby to hope, the buyers was let loose. They come in swarms, an' worked as fast as seven year locusts. They bought the stuff hangin' on the trees an' packed it themselves, with crews that had been dated up months before. An' they bought it fer a song. They'd go along most any road in New York State an' pick out the orchard that looked the best, an' the farmer was tickled to death to let 'em make their own price. Plenty was bought fer fifty cents. It was all goin' as merry as a golden weddin' an' the apples was rollin' into the cold storage houses either as the property

"Lock the door, you're apt to git robbed any minute."

of the operators bought dirt cheap or else consigned to them on terms that made the blindfolded farmer foot all the bills for haulin' and holdin' the stuff, an' left it at the disposal of the manipulators when they wanted it later on.

But there was hundreds of thousands of bar'ls of fine apples that was plowed under, after all the prunin' and sprayin' an' care an' cost. Then the shock come. The bottom dropped out of the English market. There was a tremor or two among the operators, but they should worry. They had all the apples they was, an' when everything else failed there was the good old American consumer who could always be depended on to let ye take his eye teeth away f'm him an' then sing the Long Meter Doxology—"Praise God, from whom all blessin's flow."

I always be'n a poor quitter. I hated to have that bunch of gamblers make me look like a simp, even to myself, an' I hated still worse to lose my crop. We shipped a few hunderd bar'ls to England, but the British brother in Covent Garden market is playin' with the money fer 'em yit. In spite of the civilizin' influence of the Pilgrim dinners, commission men seems to be about the same the world over. Human nature is queer stuff.

But I says to Ben, "I'll be skewered if I'm gonta let them fine Baldwins be turned under fer fertilizer. This thing about addin' humus to the soil is fine, but not when it's three inch Baldwin apples, an' the folks in town ready to trade improved real estate fer 'em, they want 'em so bad."

A returned missionary was tellin' up in Bascom's Bridge how the magician in India'll grow a tree out of the bare ground, right before your eyes, in a few minutes. But, believe me, they got nothin' to beat the way a bunch of commission men kin make the price of a bar'l o' Baldwin apples grow between the time it leaves the farm an' the time it gits to the grocery or the fruit stand. An' say—the groceryman ain't no mean performer himself.

Well, I says to Ben, "Boy, we're gonta become a public benefactor, but we ain't gonta lose nothin' by it. You go ahead 'n' pick what's left of the crop, an' pick it just as clean an' careful as you know how. I want it kep nice, becus I'm goin' down to New York an' give it away to the poor an' needy."

Ben looked at me an' says: "Pa, you go in an' lay down a spell. I'll look after the milkin'. When trouble begins to affect yer brain it's time to take a rest if ye wanta keep outa the 'sylum."

Jest the same, next mornin' about sun-up I went out into the hill orchard an' picked about a bushel o' them Baldwins. They was clean as a whistle, an' when I brought 'em down an' piled 'em on the kitchen table it looked like the cover of a forty-cent magazine. The color was fine that year.

I packed 'em in my ol' suitcase an' took the mornin' train fer New York. Quick as I could git acrost the ferry I took the subway an' went up to Will Norton's office. Will come from Bascom Bridge, an' now he's vice-president of a big bank. I got right in to see him easy, an' when I did I pulled one o' them big Baldwins outa my pocket an' laid it down on his desk.

Will jest looked at me, an' then at th' apple, fat an' red an' glossy, an' he says: "My God, Josh! Lock the door before anybody comes in. You're apt to git robbed any minute."

"Will," I says, "there's ten million bar'ls o' that stuff, more or less, layin' on the ground all over New York State, 'n' ten million more on the trees that ain't be'n blowed off yit, an' this town's bein' starved for apples. The ring has hog-tied the farmers so that they can't git the price o' the bar'ls fer the fruit, an' I come down to New York to give somebody a chanst t' eat an apple this winter without mortgagin' their happy home."

"How much?" says he.

"Will," I says, "I'll sell you one bar'l becus you're a human bein' an' one more becus you're a friend o' mine, at eight dollars the barrel, f. o. b. Bascom's Bridge, an' you pay the freight, which is seventy-nine cents."

"God of Liberty," he says, "an' I paid a quarter yistiddy fer an Oregon Spitzenberg that didn't have no taste to it at all. You're sold out."

He pulled a card out of his pocket an' wrote on it: "The bearer is O. K.—W. Z Norton."

"Go right into every bank ye see," he says, "an' show the cashier one apple an' that card. You kin start back home tonight, an' fer heaven's sake send me my two barrels first. I wouldn't trade 'em fer Hicks's fruit store in Fifth avenue."

"Will," I says, "bankers kin buy tangerines an' African apricots. If my legs holds out I'm gonta git these apples to folks that can't."

He got up an' looked at me fer about a minute. There was the old expression in his face that he used to have when he was a boy. He shook my hand, and put his arm over my shoulder an' says: "God bless your kindly ol' soul, Josh. I'm afeard you'll never git the corporation viewpoint, but I guess you ain't fur wrong at that."

An' I went out. I sold my crop, an' my neighbor's, an' every apple went straight into somebody's home—bankers barred. The last two bar'ls was sold to a Eye-talian bootblack with six kids, an' he most went crazy with joy.

Sizing Up the Price Difference.

Now, Mister City Man, all this means somethin'. In a bar'l of apples they's 167 pounds. At two pounds fer a quarter at that time folks—yes, your wife among the rest—was payin' $20 the bar'l, fer cider apples, an' at three pounds fer a quarter she was payin' fourteen a bar'l fer hog feed. An' to make a pie she had to cut away half of 'em. For good eatin' apples she was payin' ten to fifteen cents apiece. Now in a bar'l there's from 350 to around 400 apples, accordin' to size. Figger fer yourself. I was sellin' fancy hand-picked Baldwins, sound as a nut an' the best keepers in the world, fer two cents apiece or less—twelve pounds fer a quarter instid of two. An' I was makin' a decent profit on my business.

In the end of November "A Grade" State apples was sellin' in Barclay street for $2.50 a bar'l, but that was to the commission men. The prices uptown, East Side, West Side, never flickered all winter, till along in the spring when the leavin's in the warehouses had to be cleaned out.

Now just to finish th' argyment: When the commission men bought the first grade apples that was consigned to him, at $2.50 a bar'l, which he did, he sent back a return to the fool farmer that shipped 'em, showin' a freight debit of seventy-nine cents, cartage twenty-five, commission ten per cent., or a quarter of a dollar more—leavin' the farmer a balance of $1.29. Out of that the farmer had to pay at that time of year $1.75 for his bar'l, forty cents for pickin', forty more for packin' an' twenty-five more for haulin' to the station. That left him a cash loss of $1.61. Back of that he had his year's work, an' a lot of hired work at high prices if he hired—the prunin' of his trees, the plowin' an' harrowin' of his orchard, fertilizin', sprayin', which has to be done at least twice a season, and upkeep an' cost of sprayin' materials, which was higher'n' a hay barn that year, to add to the deficit. His own labor was supposed to be paid fer out of the "profits."

You don't believe all this? You'll ask how he kep' out of the Sheriff's clutches. This is how: Simply becus he made his wife that oughta been keepin' the house, an' his children that oughta be'n in school, git out 'n' pick an' pack apples like a hired man, an' he didn't have to pay 'em. An' that's the way half these farmers back in the hill deestricts keeps from bein' a public charge.

I made a profit on my apples, but the folks that bought 'em got something worth havin' an' that would stand up till spring in a decent cellar, an' they got it fer about what the groceryman was payin' fer culls. I just divided the spread with the consumer ag'n, an' we was both the gainers. He paid less an' I made more.

[This is the second of a series of articles. The third will appear in an early issue.]